

Grayson County: Making Sense with a Simple Solution

There's something special going on in Grayson County, Kentucky. It's something that is turning heads and perking up eyebrows, and perhaps providing an example for the rest of the country.

Special things often happen when people overcome big problems. And that's just what Cynthia Smith faced: *a big problem*. As director of the Grayson County Technology Center, she's been with the school for 31 years. She takes great pride in her school, her teachers, and most of all, her students. Pictures of "students of the month" line the main hallway in big, wooden frames. She calls out to students by name as they pass, and she asks them specific questions about their work.

Just a few years ago, Cynthia knew her school was missing out on something important. Her students, which now number about 450 each year, could learn skills in the carpentry, welding, marketing, health services, automotive and electric industries. But they didn't have access to one of the most high-demand, high-paying and fastest growing industries: *computerized manufacturing and machining*.

"It costs a fortune," she says. "Teaching machining means you have to have the equipment, and you're talking about buying things that take up big chunks (of money)."

Students needed the same level of technology they'd be using in the real world, and those machines were way out of the budget for the locally-funded school. An engine lathe costs about \$15,000, a vertical milling machine may cost about \$18,500 for example, and the school would need multiple machines to allow hands-on instruction for large classes of students.

A problem in common

Just a few miles away from the school, Mid-Park, a family-owned manufacturing company, faced *a big problem*. Joel Bernard, the company's general manager, needed workers. Orders were coming in, but the products couldn't be made without enough people to make them.

Joel decided he would call Dean Monarch, a career and technical education teacher in nearby Breckinridge County. He asked if he could hire some of the students who were graduating, but Mr. Monarch said they *all* already had jobs. The students who hadn't graduated yet – they all had jobs lined up after graduation, too.

The problem wasn't just something Mid-Park faced. There are about 10 manufacturing plants in Grayson County, and they were all having trouble filling their positions for skilled workers.

So Joel decided he would contact the local school officials and see if machining could be added to the curriculum.

"Honestly, I thought I'm going to go and get shot down," Joel says. "But I have to try."

He knew it was an expensive proposition. Not only would his company need to put up a lot of money, other companies would need to help, too. Plus the school board would have to invest thousands of dollars.

"They can put a whole lot of desks in for a lot less money than they can do this," says Joel. "So, I really thought it would fall on deaf ears."

He and Mid-Park's president, Greg Bernard, had a meeting with Grayson County Supt. Barry Anderson and Assistant Supt. Doug Robinson.

Joel's pitch was simple: "If we can find a way to start a machining program, I guarantee we can place those kids coming out."

Barry Anderson and Doug Robinson came to Mid-Park. They looked at the operation, toured Mid-Park's plant, looked at what the company did, and talked with some of the other plants in the county as well.

"We went to a lot of the plant manager's meetings, and just listened to the needs of the community," says Supt. Robinson. "There's a demand out there, and if we can get kids a livable wage as soon as they walk out our door into a program where they can be successful, it's a win-win for our community."

The school board agreed. They invested approximately \$100,000 for the first year. Mid-Park put up \$25,000 to get things rolling.

With the help of another local manufacturing plant, MTD Products, Cynthia Smith at the Grayson County Technology Center converted the electric classroom into a machining shop. She also hired Russell Chaney, a teacher who moved from 100 miles away at Bluegrass Community and Technical College to teach in Grayson County.

"One of our biggest hurdles was to get a great instructor to get kids involved and interested," says Supt. Robinson.

"And boy, we were fortunate there," says Joel. "The right guy came along in the right situation."

Mr. Chaney had been in the machining industry since 1987, and had been teaching at the college level for nine years.

"You know, Grayson County is not a bad place to retire," he says with a smile.

Cynthia Smith feels like she struck gold. The folks at Mid-Park say they are lucky to have him at the school. Most importantly, the students love him, and they are excited about their opportunities in life because of what he's teaching them.

Exciting opportunities

One of those students is Austin McGee. He's a senior who has lived in Grayson County his whole life. He is the first student at the Technology Center who is in the new TRACK program (Tech Ready Apprentices for Careers in Kentucky), which started its pilot program in the fall of 2013.

The TRACK program allows pre-apprenticeship opportunities to secondary students. It lets employers choose manufacturing course options that fit their needs, and one of the courses must be a cooperative education placement with the employer.

Upon successful completion of the program, students are awarded industry certification by the employers through the Kentucky Labor Cabinet, and potentially all on-the-job hours worked will be counted toward their apprenticeship. The certification will also count towards the local school district's college and career ready accountability index. There are no costs involved for the employers-- except what the companies pay as wages to the student-employees.

Austin speaks in a gentle, kind and intelligent manner. He has a solid plan for his life.

"I'll be going to college," he says. "I want to work as a job shop machinist. Then, hopefully, when I get enough experience, I'd like to open up my own shop."

He's working now at Mid-Park, and learning valuable skills.

"Bunch of good people to work around -- smart people."

And the workers there are well-paid.

“Really good money,” he says. “Usually the overtime is there, because they can’t find any machinists.”

Changing perspectives

There’s a white sign in front of the Mid-Park facility in Leitchfield. It says in big, bold black letters: *NOW HIRING*. The problem isn’t a lack of jobs, it’s a lack of the right workers.

“There’s tremendous opportunity now,” says Cynthia Smith. “These students will leave here and they can find a job.”

Every eighth grader in Grayson County gets a field trip to a manufacturing facility in the area. All the teachers and counselors in the school system have taken a tour of a manufacturing facility. They toured Mid-Park or MTD Products, all to give them an idea of what the plants do and what they are like inside.

“Now the people who are guiding these students know it’s not just people standing on an assembly line putting in this bolt, this bolt, this bolt,” Joel Bernard says. “There are high tech things going on here. I think we’ve been able to open some eyes as far as opportunities that are available.”

Austin McGee sees the opportunity. So do all of the students at the Technology Center. The senior valedictorian of Grayson County takes classes at the Technology Center. So does the senior class president.

“They learn skill sets that allow them to do things they couldn’t dream of before,” says Cynthia Smith.

There’s something special going on in Grayson County. Industry and education are coming together, and they are investing in a better future for everyone involved.

It sounds so simple, but it’s something that makes perfect sense: companies and school boards investing thousands of dollars in a program together. It’s working for Mid-Park and Grayson County, and it’s working for students like Austin McGee.

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